



Alaska Trip Report - A Grand Ornithological Adventure (May 30 - June 11, 2025)

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Traversing the Last Frontier

There is nowhere on Earth quite like Alaska. Immense, raw, and profoundly wild, it is a land that resists taming and rewards those who dare venture into its sweeping tundras, coastal fjords, boreal forests, and icy Arctic shores. Towering mountains cradle ancient glaciers, rivers cut through pristine valleys, and seemingly endless skies shimmer with midnight sun or shimmer with auroras. Alaska is more than just a place—it's a world apart. Our 11-day Eagle-Eye Bird Watching Tour through this dramatic land offered a once-in-a-lifetime journey—starting in the bird-rich river deltas and tundra of Nome, winding through the temperate rainforests and marine wilderness of Kenai Fjords National Park, and culminating far above the Arctic Circle in the snowbound expanse of Utqiagvik. This tour yielded a breathtaking 173 bird species, among them such marvels as Emperor Goose, Bluethroat, Kittlitz's Murrelet, Steller's Eider, and the mighty Gyrfalcon. We also witnessed some fantastic Siberian rarities: Red-flanked Bluetail, Red-necked Stint, and mainland Alaska's first record of Taiga Flycatcher. These sightings alone would have made the trip remarkable, but the experience was amplified by the presence of spectacular mammals. With mammalian highlights like herds of Caribou and Muskox, playful Sea Otters and sleek Orcas slicing through the waves, and extraordinary, spine-tingling Polar Bear encounters, this was far more than just a birding tour—it was an immersion into the spectacular theater of the far north. Each moment of the journey unfolded like a vivid scene from a grand nature documentary. We crossed stark landscapes untouched by time, stood silent before thundering glaciers, and marveled at nature's resilience in the face of wind and snow. Along the way, we forged bonds—not just with the wilderness, but with each other, united in awe. Alaska offered not only its species, but also its soul: a vast and sacred wilderness still ruled by nature's rhythms. This trip reminded us that in some corners of the Earth, the wild still reigns supreme. And for those who follow the call of wings and the whisper of wind through spruce, there is no finer frontier than this.

Day 1: Arrival in Nome - A Tundra Welcome

Touching down in Nome, we were greeted not by urban bustle but by an endless canvas of tundra, ice-fringed rivers, and distant mountain ridges. It was the kind of welcome that instantly shifted your internal clock—time here is dictated by sunlight, birdsong, and the wind rolling in off the Bering Sea. Without missing a beat, we headed straight from the airport into the field. The birding began practically on the runway, with Long-tailed Jaeger and the cheerful, pied flickers of White Wagtail darting near the airstrip. The Nome River Mouth soon delivered a wealth of highlights—elegant Aleutian Terns danced above the estuary while Pomarine Jaegers cruised menacingly low over the shallows. The estuary shore was dotted with newly arrived waders including a handsome Red Knot. The wildlife wasn't limited to birds. Hastings Creek surprised us with a regal herd of Muskox—a relic of the Ice Age, their thick coats billowing in the cold wind, massive bodies casting long shadows on the tundra. Cape Nome brought our first oceanic spectacles, including Black Guillemot and large flocks of scoters bobbing along the chilly waters of Norton Sound.



Musk Ox © Phil Chaon

By the time we reached Safety Sound, a rich wetland oasis tucked between gravel bars and lagoon, the list of sightings had exploded: Emperor Goose, Common Eider, the exquisitely long-billed Bar-tailed Godwit, Black Turnstone, Surfbird, Rock Sandpiper, and the vividly plumaged Eastern Yellow Wagtail. It was a truly phenomenal start—a day so rich it felt like an entire week had passed.



Sanderling © Phil Chaon

Day 2: Teller Road - Among Tundra and Mountains

Day two saw us setting off early along the legendary Teller Road, which snakes northwest out of Nome into a realm of expansive vistas, alpine ridges, and remote tundra valleys. The air was crisp, with bands of fog lingering over glacial rivers and distant hills. As we ascended through undulating terrain, the interplay of sunlight and shadow created a shifting mosaic of greens, browns, and icy blues. Our spirits soared just as high as the Golden Eagles we would soon encounter. First, we paused to admire the intricately patterned Harlequin Ducks swimming along a fast-moving creek—resplendent in their bright plumage, bobbing and diving between river rocks. Willow Ptarmigan offered some of our best views yet, camouflaged against the shrubs but betrayed by their clucking calls and head-bobbing movements. Then came a moment we'd all been hoping for: our first Bluethroats of the trip. These charismatic little birds, with their dazzling blue and red throats shimmering like sapphires in the tundra light, put on a performance worthy of royalty. We watched spellbound as a male sang from dwarf birches, occasionally flaring their tails and hopping vertically in courtship display. Further along the route, at a modest wooden bridge spanning a roaring river, we encountered Semipalmated Plovers and Wandering Tattlers—shorebirds adapted to life far from the coasts. Above us, a Golden Eagle appeared in a low, silent flyover, gliding effortlessly on the thermals before vanishing behind a nearby hill.



Semipalmated Sandpiper © Phil Chaon



Golden Eagle © Phil Chaon

Climbing into the rockier highlands, the landscape became more stark but no less beautiful. Here, amid lichens and alpine wildflowers, we spotted Rock Ptarmigan—slightly harder to detect than their willow-loving cousins. A graceful American Golden Plover called from a lichen-covered perch while American Pipits bobbed on boulders.



Rock Ptarmigan © Phil Chaon

Despite intense searching, the elusive Northern Wheatear avoided detection. However, the day remained full of rewards. A return trip to Safety Sound brought close-up views of Moose wading through willows, a stately Vega Gull drifting overhead, and no fewer than three Short-eared Owls, their buoyant flight silhouetted against the bright afternoon sky.

Day 3: Into the Interior - The Kougarok Road and Coffee Dome

On our third day, we ventured deep into the wild heart of the Seward Peninsula via Kougarok Road—a route that traces the contours of distant valleys, winding past rushing creeks, lonely hillsides, and patches of ancient taiga. The scenery was mesmerizing: steep ridges blanketed in snow patches, glacial melt carving silvery ribbons into the land, and willow thickets alive with bird calls. An early encounter with a tail-slapping American Beaver near a stream set the tone for a day of surprises. We paused along the road for more looks at Bluethroats—this time perched against the backdrop of willow thickets and dappled light. A pair of Blackpoll Warblers flitted nearby, their songs drifting on the breeze.



Bluethroat © Phil Chaon

Whimbrels were especially abundant along this stretch—perched on stumps and low rocks, calling insistently. Their curved bills and vocalizations became a soundtrack to the unfolding vistas. We also saw Short-eared Owls quartering meadows in daylight and a few bounding Snowshoe Hares still in patchy white coats. The centerpiece of the day was a hike up Coffee Dome. The trek was long and required some stamina, but the reward was immense: panoramic views of the untouched Alaskan wilderness and wildlife encounters to match. As we ascended, we flushed several Whimbrels and caught brief, heart-pounding views of a Bristle-thighed Curlew—a rare and sought-after species. And then, in a moment of near disbelief, a Gyrfalcon appeared, being chased by two aggressive Pomarine Jaegers. The aerial chase was a masterclass in power and precision, and our group was spellbound.



Descending from the heights, we were treated to the sight of several hundred Caribou grazing peacefully on a mountainside. Their antlers formed a jagged rhythm against the sky. Later, we visited a known raptor nesting site, where a Rough-legged Hawk stood sentinel near its cliffside eyrie. From the same rocky outcrop, we scoped a distant but distinct Gyrfalcon perched stoically. By evening, as we returned to Nome, we were exhausted but exhilarated—the kind of tired that only comes from immersion in wild places.

Day 4: Council Road and Skookum Pass - The Northern Wheatear Quest



Red-throated Loon © Phil Chaon

With a few target species still lingering on our wish list, we headed east along the Council Road, flanked on one side by the icy waters of Norton Sound and on the other by tundra slopes rolling up toward snow-draped peaks. The day began with a focused seawatch, during which a sharp-eyed participant picked out a Stejneger's Scoter among a scattering of White-winged Scoters. Back at Safety Sound, a welcome sight greeted us: a pair of Emperor Geese feeding near the shore—this time closer than before, allowing for unforgettable scope views. Every feather, every curve of their elegant necks, seemed carved by an artist's hand. Our attention turned then to the alpine slopes of Skookum Pass, where we had unfinished business with a Nome specialty—the Northern Wheatear. After hours of scanning rocky outcrops, we were just about to call it a day when Phil spotted one flitting among the tundra hummocks. It vanished. Undeterred, Benny climbed a steep hillside to try again but returned empty-handed. Spirits were wavering when, suddenly, another participant called out—there it was again! The group rushed over, and we finally got long, satisfying views of this handsome migrant perched on a rock, head cocked in curiosity. On the return journey, as if to celebrate our success, another pair of Gyrfalcons soared into view, giving us the closest looks yet—an unforgettable finale to our time in Nome. A final bonus came in the form of a young King Eider resting quietly on the beach at Safety Sound. With our spirits soaring and memory cards full, we boarded our afternoon flight to Anchorage, eager for the next leg of our Alaskan odyssey.

Day 5: From Rainy Anchorage to the Coastal Charms of Seward

We awoke in Anchorage under a veil of steady, soaking rain. Clouds hung low over the city, muting the verdant greens of the surrounding boreal forest. Our hopes of birding Kincaid Park were initially dampened—not just in mood, but literally, as the downpour persisted through the morning. Nevertheless, even between squalls, Lake Hood near our hotel offered some surprise rewards. Flocks of swallows—Bank, Tree, Cliff, and the striking Violet-green—swooped low over the water, snatching midges from the air with remarkable precision. Among them, we managed excellent views of Barrow’s Goldeneye and Red-necked Grebes.



Red-necked Grebe © Phil Chaon

Leaving the city behind, we wound our way south along the scenic Seward Highway, one of the most beautiful drives in North America. The road hugs Turnagain Arm, where tide-slick mudflats stretched to the mist-shrouded Chugach Mountains. Despite the weather, our spirits lifted as we headed toward the Kenai Peninsula, watching waterfalls cascade from moss-covered cliffs. By midday, a break in the weather gave us new hope. At Bear Creek, the curtain lifted enough for us to enjoy an enchanting scene: an American Dipper bobbing on a boulder, then diving into the rushing stream in pursuit of aquatic insects. Nearby, salmon—bright flashes of crimson and silver—wriggled upstream on their journey to spawn.



Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel © Phil Chaon

After lunch in Seward, we made our way to Lowell Point. Here, Resurrection Bay opened before us, its deep waters surrounded by dense Sitka spruce and hemlock forests clinging to steep, rocky slopes. Along the shoreline, we got our first looks at the elusive Marbled Murrelet and were treated to flybys of Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels gliding like tiny ghosts just above the flat mirror-like sea.



Townsend's Warbler © Phil Chaon

The surrounding rainforest teemed with life. We had arm's-length views of a radiant male Townsend's Warbler, its yellow face and black crown glowing against the emerald backdrop. A

Rufous Hummingbird zipped fiercely through the parking lot, defending a tiny patch of flowering salmonberry like a warrior guarding a castle. Eventually, our persistence paid off when a Pacific Wren—tiny, brown, and bold—hopped up on a mossy branch and sang its intricate, bubbling song. It was a perfect end to a day that began in rain but ended in magic.



Rufous Hummingbird © Phil Chaon

Day 6: Kenai Fjords - Glaciers, Puffins, and the Pulse of the Sea

A stunning reversal in weather greeted us the next morning. We boarded our vessel under blue skies and calm seas for a full-day excursion into the heart of Kenai Fjords National Park. Our destination: the breathtaking Northwest Glacier. As we cruised out of Seward's small boat harbor, we quickly encountered a raft of Sea Otters floating on their backs, cracking open shellfish and grooming with enviable nonchalance. Their curious faces drew smiles from every corner of the boat. Just beyond Resurrection Bay, the waters teemed with seabirds—Common Murres floated in dense congregations, and groups of Horned Puffins with their colorful bills zipped by like winged torpedoes.



Sea Otter © Phil Chaon

We scanned cliffs and sea caves for Red-faced Cormorant, and eventually, our patience was rewarded when a cormorant flew from the surf to a hidden nest ledge. Next, the radio crackled with excitement—a pod of Orcas had been spotted nearby. We reached the location just in time to see these majestic predators surfacing and diving in synchrony, hunting salmon. One large male broke the surface mere feet from the bow, exhaling a spout of mist. At the Chiswell Islands, we were surrounded by seabird colonies. Tufted Puffins gathered in noisy, comical groups beside their Horned cousins, while the raspy chatter of Parakeet Auklets echoed off the rocks. Further offshore, we located Ancient Murrelets and Rhinoceros Auklets bouncing among the swells, each more charming than the last.



Arriving at the face of Northwest Glacier was like entering another realm. The towering wall of ice loomed impossibly high, a cathedral of blue frozen light. We turned off the engines and listened in awe as the glacier groaned and cracked, eventually releasing massive chunks of ice into the sea with thunderous splashes. Nearby, Harbor Seals and their pups rested on floating ice, wary but tolerant of our quiet presence. Our primary quarry here, however, was the elusive Kittlitz's Murrelet. With some focused scanning, we found several of these rare, glacier-dependent seabirds—small, subtly patterned, and perfectly suited to this frigid environment.



Harbour Seal © Phil Chaon

As we turned back toward Seward, the boat erupted with one last exclamation: a Humpback Whale, the final punctuation on a perfect day.

Day 7: Seward to Anchorage - Forest Song and Final Finds

Before departing Seward, we returned once more to the tranquil beauty of Lowell Point. The air was cool but calm, and the morning sun dappled the forest floor in golden light. This time, we were rewarded with the haunting, flute-like song of the Varied Thrush, and finally spotted the shy bird perched near the top of a tall Sitka Spruce. As we made our way back to Anchorage, we paused at several boreal forest locations and added a few final species to our growing list. Boreal Chickadees moved in loose flocks through the evergreens, joined by Fox Sparrows and Red-breasted Nuthatches.



Red-breasted Nuthatch © Phil Chaon

In Anchorage, we explored Westchester Lagoon. Here, Arctic Terns hovered and dove with surgical precision, Red-necked Grebes displayed courtship behaviors, and a pair of Sandhill Cranes marched regally through the wetlands. Out on the tidal mudflats, we were thrilled to locate a pair of Hudsonian Godwits probing the muck with their long, delicate bills. We ended the day with a second visit to Kincaid Park—this time braving a bustling soccer tournament crowd. Despite the activity, we headed quietly into the spruce forest and struck gold: a beautifully camouflaged Spruce Grouse emerged from the underbrush. Known locally as the "fool hen" for its calm demeanor, this bird approached our group without fear, offering soul-satisfying views.



Spruce Grouse © Phil Chaon

Day 8: Willow Burn and the Arctic Jump - From Spruce to Snow

The morning took us north along the Parks Highway toward the Willow Burn—our final chance to find some of Alaska’s boreal specialists. The drive wound past glacial valleys and fire-scarred forests, eventually opening onto a plateau where recovery from a previous wildfire had created prime habitat. Our first find was a family group of Canada Jays—curious and bold, they flitted from branch to branch, watching us as intently as we watched them. Soon after, we struck two big targets: a striking male American Three-toed Woodpecker hammering on a charred trunk and, moments later, the bold arrival of a Black-backed Woodpecker that allowed prolonged views.



American Three-toed Woodpecker © Phil Chaon



Black-backed Woodpecker © Phil Chaon

Back in Anchorage, we boarded a flight north into a world transformed. Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow), perched at the very top of the United States, greeted us with snow-covered tundra, frozen seas, and a piercing Arctic wind. Summer had yet to fully arrive. With rental cars delayed, we scrambled taxis and raced to a site where a rare Siberian vagrant had been reported. Incredibly, we soon located the correct patch of open tundra and were greeted by not one but two rare gems: a vivid Bluethroat and, more impressively, the unmistakable profile of a Red-flanked Bluetail—a bird almost never seen this far north. As the sun lingered in the sky, refusing to set, we received one final surprise: four magnificent Polar Bears, feeding on a Bowhead Whale carcass out on the sea ice. The scale, power, and quiet dignity of these predators took our breath away.



Day 9: Into the Arctic Realm - Exploring Utqiagvik

Utqiagvik greeted us with a frigid wind and gray skies— a final day of winter weather before the long summer. This was the furthest north many of us had ever ventured, and the starkness of the Arctic, its sheer purity and raw stillness, was profoundly humbling. Despite the late arrival of spring, wildlife teemed in pockets of meltwater and snowy hollows, pushing against the final clutches of winter. We returned to a small pond near the edge of town—one of the few sources of open water—and were immediately rewarded. A parade of Arctic waterfowl greeted us: Brant, sleek Tundra Swans, and the handsome Long-tailed Ducks. Suddenly, an excited shout announced the arrival of five Yellow-billed Loons. We watched as they heaved against the growing wind and rain. Driving deeper into the snow covered tundra, the land showed the first breaths of the explosion of summer life. Every melt pool harbored breeding Red Phalaropes spinning like tops, Dunlin flashing their rufous backs, and Pectoral Sandpipers engaged in dramatic fluttering displays. Against the howling wind and biting sleet, we stood our ground—and were rewarded. A King Eider in perfect breeding plumage gleamed like a jewel, and nearby, a group of diminutive Steller's Eiders bobbed in a half-frozen pool.



King Eiders © Phil Chaon

Evening brought clearing skies and a dramatic close to the day. On a drive past the town's edge, we spotted a Snowy Owl perched atop a metal rooftop, its yellow eyes scanning the land below. The moment was both serene and striking. We paid one more visit to the bowhead whale carcass out on the sea ice, and were thrilled to see the Polar Bears again—four massive figures feeding, sleeping, and wandering the white expanse.

Day 10: Ice and Song - The Arctic Awakens

The tenth day dawned differently—with warmth. Sunlight glinted off rapidly melting snowbanks and

pooled in every hollow. What had been an icy wilderness was now yielding to spring. The air was alive with bird song and the movement of water. We began with a seawatch, the horizon shrouded in fog that pushed birds closer to shore. Wave after wave of King and Common Eiders streamed past, long lines stretching to the misty north. With patient scanning, we picked out a distant pair of Spectacled Eiders, flashing briefly as they passed with a large eider flock. Yellow-billed Loons once again graced the skies, shining in the sun as they moved across the still-frozen ocean.



King and Common Eiders © Phil Chaon

After a warm lunch, we turned from birds to people with a visit to the Inupiat Heritage Center. There, among artifacts and oral histories, we deepened our understanding of the human spirit that thrives in this challenging land. We immersed ourselves in stories of whaling traditions, admired the craftsmanship of tools and parkas, and marveled at the harmony between the Inupiat people and the natural world around them.



Steller's Eider © Phil Chaon

With the sun still high in the sky, we ventured back to Cakeeater Road. The tundra had changed almost overnight. A Black-bellied Plover had arrived in the melt zones, and larger congregations of shorebirds had formed. An adventurous detour down a muddy road toward the town dump provided not only growing numbers of King and Steller's Eiders but also a heart-stopping sighting: a Taiga Flycatcher! First spotted by one of the group as a nondescript blur crossing the road, it quickly proved to be something extraordinary. Word spread like wildfire. Within minutes, nearly every birder in town had converged, and all were rewarded with clear, diagnostic views of this historic mainland Alaska first.



Taiga Flycatcher © Phil Chaon

The adrenaline hadn't worn off by evening. With the light of the midnight sun soft and golden, a core group of tireless birders took to the tundra again, searching from 11 p.m. until nearly 2 a.m. Their efforts were rewarded: a sharp-eyed scan picked up a Red-necked Stint—tiny and precise in its movements, foraging in meltwater. Then, as if conjured by wish, an Arctic Warbler emerged, flicking across the open patches of tundra. It was a fitting gift from the land of the midnight sun.



Arctic Warbler © Phil Chaon

Day 11: Farewell to the North - Parting Glimpses



Red-necked Stint © Phil Chaon

Our final full day broke clear and calm. The tundra was transformed: white giving way to brown and green, the change almost audible in the rustling of thawing grasses. For those who had missed the late-night birding, we retraced our steps to the Red-necked Stint and Arctic Warbler, both of which obligingly reappeared, a final blessing from the birding gods. A participant who had missed the earlier owl had their dream fulfilled when a Snowy Owl materialized along the roadside, its brilliant white feathers radiant against the emerging tundra. We lingered, watching as it rotated its head with an eerie grace, before lifting off and gliding over the snowmelt.



Snowy Owl © Phil Chaon

Before returning to town, we made one last pilgrimage to the dump. Dozens of sea ducks, eiders included, gathered in the warming waters outside. And there, impossibly close, stood a Polar Bear. Towering, inquisitive, and utterly wild, it watched us from a mere 50 meters away. Safe in our van, we sat in reverent silence, knowing we were witnessing something that would live in our memories forever. As our flight lifted off from the Arctic coast, the land stretched below us—raw, infinite, and magnificent. We shared one final dinner in Anchorage, recalling our favorite moments: the first Emperor Goose, the mountain-top Gyrfalcon, the Taiga Flycatcher miracle, and of course, the bears. This had been no ordinary tour. This was Alaska—untamed, unforgettable, and unequalled. [Alaska Birding \(May 30 - Jun 11, 2025\) eBird list](#)